

The Vancouver Historical Society Newsletter

Preserving and promoting the history of Vancouver since 1936

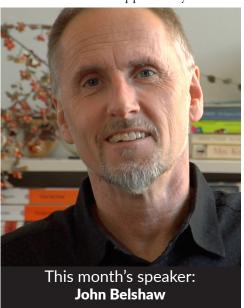
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Reckless Riders and Reckless Writers: Cycling Accidents in the news since 1886

John Belshaw is a History professor at Thompson Rivers University (Open Learning) and the Program Manager on the VHS board. He has presented before – back in 2012 with his wife and co-writer and fellow historian, Diane Purvey, on their book, *Vancouver Noir* – since which time he has written, co-written, or edited three university level history textbooks and the popular collection, *Vancouver Confidential*. We interviewed Belshaw in his home in Strathcona and managed not to confuse "wreckless" with "reckless."

How did you come to this study of cycling accidents?

It seems that my research career has always made room for unfortunate events. In the 1990s I studied coal mining accidents on 19th century Vancouver Island. Diane and I later co-wrote a study of roadside shrines in BC a few years later – "Private Grief, Public Mourning" – and that offered an opportunity to think







Clippings from the *Vancouver Sun* in the 1950s. "Look ma, no hands!" Then, "Look ma, no teeth!

COLLECTION OF JOHN BELSHAW

about how fatalism was eclipsed about a hundred years ago by a sense that accidents and deaths could be managed. Our society went from the perspective that an accident victim's time was up to one where people were more in control of their destiny. There was widespread hope that education, engineering, science, and medicine could enable us all to live long lives. But fatalism never completely went away, nor did accidents.

At the start of Covid I was invited to contribute to a collection of new studies on accidents and, rather than revisit miners and unlucky drivers, I decided to focus on cycling accidents. In part this is because I am a cyclist and I noticed how media today positions the cyclist as an equal partner in accidents involving cars, despite the enormous difference in mass, velocity, and power. Road safety, ICBC likes to say, is "a shared responsibility." But then news headlines take the driver out of the equation: "Cyclist dies

in collision with car," for example. "Car hits cyclist" is also typical. Often you can read through the whole article without any mention of a driver being involved. Clearly these are not autonomous vehicles – not yet – so where is the driver? Who is the driver? Why is the cyclist victim sometimes named but the driver not? When the driver is mentioned it's often to point out that alcohol was or was not a factor or that the driver stayed on the scene ... which, of course, they're obliged to do. "Staying on the scene" becomes a way for media to mitigate the driver's culpability: sure, they blew through a stop sign but they stayed on the scene so they can't be all bad.

These observations gave shape to my question: was the language of cycling accidents always like this? If not, why not? And what do reports of simple street accidents reveal about Vancouver in different decades?

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President's Note

ay is our last lecture of the season, and we have a suitably lacksquare "good weather" subject for it. We also hold our Annual General Meeting and do our society's housekeeping this month. Please consider attending, and if you can't and you're happy with what we've been doing, send me your proxy. I'm pleased to say we have good candidates for our board vacancies, and wish to thank Brenda Peterson, Lynn Copeland, and Helen Vanwel for their service on the board over past years. We wish them well in their new volunteering endeavours.

-Michael Kluckner, presidentvhs@gmail.com

Notice of Annual General Meeting and Call for Nominations

The Vancouver Historical Society will hold its AGM by Zoom teleconference on **Tuesday**, **May 23rd at 7 pm.** All members will receive by email an invitation to the meeting a few days before.

As has been done in previous years, if you're unable to attend you may send your proxy vote to the President, Michael Kluckner, in advance of the meeting, at presidentvhs@gmail.com

Agenda:

- 1. Approval of 2022 AGM minutes
- 2. President's Report
- 3. Treasurer's Report
- 4. Report of Nomination Committee

All nominations for board positions must be received in writing at presidentvhs@gmail.com 7 days before the meeting.

Search for our video archive at "Vancouver Historical Society on YouTube" Videographer: Elwin Xie















The Archives' 90th Birthday Celebration

Readers who are on social media should follow the fascinating posts every day on the City of Vancouver Archives' pages. They are highlighting parts of the collection with some great photos. We'll be visiting the Archives itself for our June 14th field trip.

The Back-Page Quiz

torn down about 20 years ago and replaced with townhouses. Fraser Street at 22nd Avenue. The old house on the bluff was

Upcoming Events

Members will receive registration details for each field trip in an email a few weeks before the event. Space is limited and there will be a follow-up confirmation request so that we can accommodate everyone on a waiting list. There will be more details in the June newsletter.

Wednesday, June 14th, 10 am An Event with the City of Vancouver Archives

On its 90th anniversary, Archives staff will present a tour of its holdings and discussion at the Archives.

Sunday July 16th, 2:00 pm Dressed for History at the MoV

Ivan Sayers

A special tour with curator Ivan Sayers of the costume exhibition at the Museum of Vancouver, concluding with coffee and cookies in the MoV boardroom.

August, date TBA A Tour of the Orpheum Theatre

Arranged by Bill Allman of the Entertainment Hall of Fame, this special tour will include a visit to its Wurlitzer organ conducted by Tom Carter, VHS Treasurer and our April speaker!

Welcome to new VHS Members

Aaron Bailey Sheila Martineau Heather Anne Driver Maureen Painter

Vancouver Historical Society Executive Board: 2022 - 2023

(ELECTED MAY 24, 2022)

PRESIDENT Michael Kluckner

VICE PRESIDENT Jan Fialkowski

TREASURER Tom Carter

RECORDING SECRETARY Helen Vanwel

DIRECTOR (PROGRAMS) John Belshaw DIRECTOR (COMMUNICATIONS) Robert Sanzalone

DIRECTOR (FIELD TRIPS) Brenda Peterson

DIRECTOR (YOUTH OUTREACH) Jurian ter Horst

DIRECTOR Lynn Copeland

Appointed Positions

MEMBERSHIP Mary Wallace Poole

VIDEOGRAPHY Elwin Xie

NEWSLETTER MAILING Michael O'Hagan

NEWSLETTER TEMPLATE/LAYOUT Kellan Higgins/MK

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A history of bicycle wreckfulness and recklessness



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So, what was different in the past?

A lot. Journalists were far less concerned with privacy. An accident in the 1950s could generate days of news coverage that explored the life and character of the victim, including names, addresses, the names of other family members, their occupations, and so on. The driver would be identified too. Even in the 1970s and

Clockwise from top left: The Vancouver Bicycle Club in front of the observation point ('summer house') at Prospect Point 1895; Mr. H. McCulloch and chum in front of W.A. Brown Plumber, 239 East Hastings Street, 1905, Hannah Knudson collection; Bicycle Club on ferry, May 1935, photograph by James Crookall. CITY OF VANCOUVER ARCHIVES PHOTOS AM54-S4-: ST PK P174, AM1376-F14-: CVA 312-40, AM640-S1-: CVA 260-1411

'80s the name, neighbourhood, and profession of an unfortunate cyclist was usually exposed but we saw a real drift away from identifying motorists responsible for accidents and deaths. Increasingly their privacy became a concern. In the 1950s – and even more in the 1920s and '30s

when automobiles were still relatively new and safety was rarely enforced – the press would sometimes go after drunk or hit-and-run drivers as "monsters" and "killers." You'd never see that now.

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Cycling Accidents in the news since 1886

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What about in the pre-World War I period?

I recently found an eye-popping document in the Police Archives at the wonderful Vancouver Police Museum. It dates from the 1920s and it shows that every motorist whose actions resulted in a death was automatically charged with manslaughter. The driver might get a fine or license suspension, but they were also looking at jail time. A Coroner's inquest would follow almost immediately, and the court would decide whether to proceed with charges. Remarkably, the same applied to cyclists who killed. Now, there aren't a lot of those. I've found only five in Vancouver since 1886. There's a case from 1913 of two boys on a tandem who clip - fatally - a pedestrian near Commercial Drive. One is fifteen and he's looking at a long spell behind bars, even though he was on the back seat. There's another in 1900 which plays out on a larger stage and occupies the front page of local papers for days. I'll be talking about this incident in my presentation because it tells us a lot about the press at the time, what



W.M. Bruce photograph of girls and their bikes, c. 1900. British Columbia Sugar Refinery collection. **CVA AM1592-1-S2-F05-: 2011-092.0279**

"cycling" looked like at a social and spatial level, and how it illuminates the way that society in early Vancouver actually worked. As Lance Armstrong used to say, "It's not about the bike." Well, not just

about the bike.

Should attendees wear hi-viz vests to the presentation?

Absolutely. And helmets.

A quiz: this is photograph CVA 660-339 (AM505-S1-) in the John Davidson fonds at the City of Vancouver Archives – that's "Botany John" Davidson (1878–1970) of UBC, the Provincial Botanist responsible for gardens at UBC and Essondale-Riverview. The tentative title is "A road under construction in Kerrisdale," ca. 1913.

But, you ask, where is there a road like this in Kerrisdale? Where could it be?

Here's a hint – the signboard on the streetcar. The streetcar itself is a hint.

Give up?

Look for the answer at the bottom left of page 2.



